



Water in Central Asia

International partnership for better water cooperation and management in Central Asia



Central Asia's big question: How to better manage shared water resources?

Central Asia is a massive region of varied geography and climate. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan that make up this region feature mountains, vast deserts and treeless, grassy steppes. The region is classified as arid, which means water is an extremely valuable resource for around 70 million people who live there.

Water that mainly comes from the mountains in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan supplies more than 6,000 rivers, including the great transboundary rivers of Amudarya and Syrdarya, which downstream countries - Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - depend on for their agricultural and other needs. The downstream countries also make up the Aral Sea basin which is home to millions of people who need water for drinking and farming.

Water is, thus, critical to irrigated agriculture, which is the economic mainstay of the five countries. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan use water also to generate more than 90 percent of their electricity.

As climate changes and water gets less, the competing demands of agriculture in the downstream countries and hydropower generation in the upstream countries raise serious concern over future regional collaboration.



Water scarcity is already a problem in the region. This is partly because the transboundary rivers have greatly suffered in the past from destructive human interventions leading to the Aral Sea disaster. What is more, mismanagement of water resources remains a major problem in all countries.

While water distribution is a cause of worry, it also presents an opportunity for greater regional integration and cooperation. Finding common ground would benefit all countries and open new opportunities to sustainably and jointly utilize shared water resources.

Though there is no blueprint for how transboundary cooperation should be done, it is important that:

- The states feel ownership of, and political commitment to, the processes of promoting cooperation
- The benefits of water and productive outcomes of water are shared
- The states shift focus and move from challenges and constraints to opportunities
- Broad partnerships are built for negotiated outcomes among and within the states
- Trust and personal relations are developed among delegations from the states and between national water user groups



Hydropolitics of Central Asia

Following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the five countries agreed to put cooperation at the heart of transboundary water management. They established the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination to facilitate water distribution and the Interstate Council for the Aral Sea Basin and the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea, both merged in 1997, to address the problems of the Aral Sea.

Contrary to expectations, the organizations failed to strengthen regional collaboration as water distribution proved to be contentious. As a result, many bilateral and multilateral agreements regulating water flow had to be negotiated. However, this framework has not quite helped to smooth out differences between the countries. Disagreements still occur.

Overall, there are five factors that explain the failure of institutions and agreements in dealing with water resources in the region:

- Limited mandates of regional institutions
- Constrained autonomy of regional institutions
- Weak institutional capacity in water management
- Insufficient financing for water management
- Lack of enforcement of agreements



While water might be a bone of contention between the countries, it may also serve as a source of greater regional cooperation.

It is, however, crucial that there are effective and sustainable national and regional legal and institutional frameworks supported by international mediation.

International organizations may facilitate stable and reliable cooperation, thus increasing security for competing uses and preventing disputes.

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International partnership

In response to the need to address water management challenges in Central Asia, the Dubai-based International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA) and the Ankara-based Hydropolitics Academy (HPA) have formed an international consortium to offer world-class advisory and technical services to development and donor organizations, national research institutions and governments.

The consortium seeks to facilitate regional water cooperation and transfer knowledge and technology to improve water management at the local, national and regional levels.

To achieve this goal, the consortium will take an interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach focused on lasting outcomes.

ICBA

ICBA is a unique applied agricultural research center in the world that is focused on marginal areas where an estimated 1.7 billion people live. It identifies, tests and introduces resource-efficient, climate-smart crops and technologies that are best suited to different regions affected by salinity, water scarcity and drought. Through its work, ICBA helps to improve food security and livelihoods for some of the poorest rural communities around the world.

Since its formation in 1999, the center has evolved into a world-class organization with an international team of scientists who specialize in natural resources management, water and soil salinity management, crop diversification, climate change adaptation, aquaculture and policy development.

Through its programs in different countries, ICBA assists a wide range of stakeholders, including farmers and policymakers, in dealing with water scarcity and food insecurity. Over the years, the center has accumulated a large pool of knowledge and solutions suited to address wide-ranging challenges.

ICBA has developed extensive expertise in, among other things:

- Water-efficient technologies

- Drought-tolerant crops
- Natural resources management
- Climate change adaptation
- Policy formulation, including groundwater governance
- Transboundary water management

HPA

HPA is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental and civil society initiative. HPA is an educational and training center of the Hydropolitics Association. The academy focuses on hydropolitics, water diplomacy and water-related issues such as energy, food and environmental security.

In cooperation with different partners, HPA provides advisory services to intergovernmental bodies, research institutions, academic and governmental organizations.

HPA also carries out interdisciplinary research on hydro-stability, sustainable water management and suitable solutions within the framework of the hydro-diplomacy concept.

HPA is committed to facilitating peaceful and sustainable water management at the local, regional and international levels.

With a focus on transboundary water issues in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, HPA also provides support in using water as a means of peace and collaboration.

It does so through encouraging effective and equitable allocation and development of water resources, and harmonization of water governance systems by supporting the application of integrated water resources and cooperative river basin management principles to shared water resources.







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